

7 POMPEII

Pompeii was an ordinary city in the Roman Empire. It had theatres, temples, bathhouses, markets and pubs. It was in a beautiful location, too, close to the bay of Naples and the green slopes of the mountain Vesuvius.

In August of the year 79 CE, there had been some earth tremors in Pompeii, but the people weren't worried. The morning of 24 August was just like any other. Then, at around midday, a huge cloud of burning-hot gas and rocks filled the sky. Many people ran for the coast. Some went to fetch their belongings. Some hid indoors until the rocks stopped falling.

Those who survived may have felt relief, but the most powerful eruption came the next day. Volcanic ash and a flow of magma covered the city, killing everyone and everything still there. No one in Pompeii knew that they lived at the foot of an active volcano until it was too late.

For nearly 1,500 years, the city of Pompeii was lost to the sands of time – or, more accurately, to the ash of the volcano! Some of Pompeii's wall paintings were seen in 1592, but they were covered again. It wasn't until 1748 that archaeologists worked to unearth the lost city. People had to dig five metres to uncover the streets of Pompeii.

Workers discovered that the last moments of the city had been frozen in time. The heat from the volcano, and the way rain mixed with the ash, had created a protective shell. Even the bodies of the people of Pompeii had been encrusted in the ash. Over time, the bodies decayed, leaving just the empty shells. Soon, people realised that they could pour plaster into the shells to see how people in Pompeii had looked – and how they were behaving when they died.

Because of this, the disaster provided us with a clear model of life during Roman times. We are able to explore the buildings where people lived, the art they created and how they traded. In a way, the deaths of Pompeii's people were able to bring Roman times to life for the modern world.

